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while resolved not to tolerate this Norwegian bridgehead in Västergötland, is trying to minimize hostilities. He waits until the lake is solidly frozen, then offers the Norwegians free departure with all their booty. When their commander replies that the Norwegians would not let themselves be driven away like a herd of cattle from a pasture, Ingi moves his troops to the island and still offers the Norwegians free departure with all their equipment, but without the booty. When this is rejected, too, he attacks the fort and sets it alight, and when the Norwegians sue for armistice, they have to leave their weapons and upper garments behind, and each man is hit with a stick as he is leaving[22].

One of the two Norwegian commanders thus humiliated, Finnur Skoftason, also figures in my last tripartite story. Skofti Ögmundarson and his three sons have been faithful supporters of King Magnús but at a later stage, there is some disagreement with the King about an inheritance to which they are entitled. In ch. 17–19, their attempts to obtain their right are described. They plead their case before the king, first the father, then Finnr, then Ögmundr, who had secured the king's survival after a defeat by putting his doublet on and thus detracting his pursuers, but the king remains stubborn. After that, Skofti and his sons leave Norway and sail to Italy. What about the third son, Þórdr, who in ch. 20 is said to have lived longest of them and died in Sicily? There was, narratively speaking, simply no room for him after three parallel actions had been undertaken.

[22] Magnúss saga berfœtts, ch. 13.

Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, Berkeley

The Elves' Point of View

Cultural Identity in Contemporary Icelandic Elf-Tradition

The fairy faith, once so widespread and well attested in Europe, is generally thought to be extinct (Christiansen 1975, 95). The usual concessions are made for the odd believer on the fringe of society in Ireland (Ballard 1991; Bourke 1996; Christiansen 1975; Lysaght 1991), Wales (Gwyndaf 1991 and 1994), and even Newfoundland (Butler 1991; Narváez 1991; Rieti 1991). If I am not mistaken, however, these socially marginal survivals are only taken to reinforce the notion of the fairies' farewell. However, not all the fairies have said their last good-byes: elves are alive and frisky in modern day Iceland. Though Iceland's position is peripheral by most standards, elf beliefs can most certainly not be considered marginal in Icelandic society. An opinion poll, taken in July 1998, suggests that a majority of Icelanders put stock in the existence of elves. More than nine out of ten persons polled replied when asked, "Do you believe in elves?" Of these, 54.4 % said yes, while only 45.6 % answered in the negative[1]. A more detailed and extensive survey from 1975 is probably more representative of the various degrees of conviction on the scale between belief and disbelief (Haraldsson 1978)[2]. The results indicate that, at least then, a fairly narrow margin

[1] This question was posed by pollsters at DV, the country's second most widely distributed newspaper, as part of a sampling of opinions on a variety of topics of current interest, most of them on politics and government. Replies about elf belief were correlated to the sex of those polled and their professed political party sympathies. Interestingly, while males were evenly divided into yea-sayers (50,2 %) and nay-sayers (49,8 %), the number of females who acknowledged belief (59,4 %) was considerably greater than that of females who claimed disbelief (40.6 %). As for political correlations, the tally of believers and skeptics broke just about even in most parties, except for the Progressive party (Framsóknarflokkurinn), where a large majority affirmed belief in elves (64,2 % vs. 35.8 %) (DV, July 22, 1998). The latter correlation may be relevant to the argument advanced in this paper, since the Progressive party is known for agriculture advocacy, policies intended to halt or reverse migration from rural to urban areas, skepticism towards international cooperation, and a conservative stance in the politics of culture.

[2] The survey, conducted by psychologist Erlendur Haraldsson, consisted of 54 questions on dreams, religion, folk belief, attitudes toward mystical phemomena, mystical experience and personal acquaintance with mediums, soothsayers, faith healers or psychic healers. One of those questions was about belief in the existence of elves and hidden people (Haraldsson 1978, 9 sq.). Another question inquired whether participants had seen elves or hidden people. 5 % answered in the positive (107, 146). It may be of interest that no significant correlation was found between the age of informants and their answer, nor was there a significant difference between the answers of informants in rural and urban areas (26). However, there is a clear and significant negative relation between the informants' level of education and their degree of belief (150).

separated the number of people who considered elves likely (15 %) or certain (7 %) to exist from those that deemed their existence unlikely (18 %) or impossible (10 %). A third of the sample entertained the possibility of their existence (33 %), neither affirming nor denying it, while one out of six pronounced no opinion on the matter (17 %) (Haraldsson 1978, 27)[3].

In this article I will address the contemporary tradition about elves – the beliefs, narratives and experiences associated with them. My focus is on the construction of alterity by tradition participants and the concerns about identity and change that crystallize in this construction[4]. The data are in the first instance from fieldwork I conducted in 1995 and 1996 with 35 elf-harried roadworkers and other participants in projects with which elves are supposed to have interfered. In addition to my fieldwork, I make use of files archived in the National Museum of Iceland, Department of Ethnology. The archive consists largely of letters that regular informants have written in reply to qualitative questionnaires on various topics, garnered over three and a half decades. The letters report both personal experiences and accounts from local tradition.

Before presenting my findings and interpretation, a few words are in order about these Otherworld traditions such as we encounter them in recordings from the 16th through 19th centuries[5]. I should make it clear from the outset, that

[3] Another reliable survey, taken in 1995, is not representative of the general population, since it specifically gauged the attitudes and experiences of people with a confirmed interest in mysticism and unconventional medicine. Its author, sociologist and church historian Pétur Pétursson, found that 70 % of that group considered elves to exist, 6 % considered them not to exist, 23 % did not know and 1 % did not answer the question (1996, 47 sq.). The same survey indicates that, in comparison, only 43 % thought that space aliens can appear on earth, whereas 13 % did not think so, 41 % did not know and 3 % did not answer (48). Needless to say, these figures are very compatible with theories of belief of the past three decades, that regard half-belief and the negotiation of believability as characteristic of folk beliefs and legends (e. g. Bennett 1984 and 1987; Butler 1980 and 1990; Campbell 1996; Dégh 1971, 1996, and 1997; Dégh/Vázsonyi 1971; Haut 1989; Hufford 1976; Joyner 1982; Motz 1998; Mullen 1971; Salor 1968; Tangherlini 1990 and 1994; Toelken 1985).

[4] Rosan A. Jordan presents an empirical study on how supernatural folklore can be used to negotiate cultural identity in an article from 1975. The study focuses on one tradition participant and describes how she uses lore of the supernatural to display cultural knowledge in social interaction and define herself in relation to other participants and non-participants, depending on her purpose and the social context in which the interaction takes place. Though Jordan's analysis is quite illuminating, it is conducted on a level very different from that undertaken here – individual as opposed to collective – and is not directly pertinent to the matter at hand.

[5] The scholarly literature on Icelandic elf-tradition is, with one exception, restricted to descriptions and analyses of older data, mostly from 19th century collections. The most important among those studies are Aðalsteinsson 1993; Bjartmarsdóttir 1982, 1990 and 1991; Hallgrímsson 1996; Nordal 1972, xv–xxxiii; Sveinsson 1940, 151–165, 259–273. A few studies compare traditions from the 19th century to those attested to in medieval Icelandic sources: Aðalsteinsson 1985, 112–124 and 1990; Lecouteux 1988 and 1995; Mazo 1991; Motz 1973; Ólafsson 1962; Strömbäck 1931 and 1970. The one article that deals with selected contemporary traditions, Björnsson 1996, does so only to dismiss them as inauthentic. Apparently, the author finds the cases he considers to be exclusively contemporary, i. e., not attested to in older tradition, and rules them out as evidence of folk belief on those grounds. Furthermore, he finds that contemporary elf-tradition in general reeks of money. If I have understood him correctly, he claims that modern elflore is to a great extent fabricated to defraud tourists, that it is, in other words, folklorism. Besides taking for granted the thorny issues of authenticity (Bendix 1997), essentially equating old with genuine, these claims are based on negligible evidence and clearly contradict available data. To be sure, elven places by the beaten path are pointed out to tourists on a regular basis. However, it seems a wild leap, to me at least, from that observation to the conclusion that this somehow unauthenticates the tradition. Surely, it has little to do with the motivations of tradition participants like elf-harried roadworkers. See further my criticism (Hafstein 1998) and the rebuttal in Björnsson 1998.

Icelandic elves (*álfar*), also known as hidden people (*huldufólk*), are not the wee little creatures that the English term connotes. Nor do they have the tokens of alterity characteristic of mainland Scandinavian tradition, like the wooden back of the *skogsrå* or the tail that sometimes adorns the behind of the *huldre*. Rather, legends depict them as a people, different from humankind, that lives alongside the human population and resembles it in most respects. They are alike in appearance[6] – in body[7], stature[8], and costume[9], – and their economy is of the same sort: like humans, the hidden people have livestock[10], cut hay[11], row boats, flense whales and pick berries. Like humans, they too have priests and sheriffs and go to church on Sundays[12].

It's hardly a novel claim that conceptions of the supernatural reflect the culture to which they belong. We are not, however, entitled to conclude that the Otherworld is merely an extension of this one – it should rather be seen as its counterpart, circumscribing and defining the boundaries of the 'inside', the local human community, through its manifestation of an 'outside', the domain of the Other. Beyond that, the otherness of elves in the old tradition, like that of their counterparts in mainland Scandinavia, stems from their being unknown and ultimately unknowable. They are distant strangers in the very vicinity of home, living across the field from the farmhouse and yet in another world (Lindow 1978, 55 sq.). Elves represent nature in the heart of culture; the places attributed to them are wilderness in the midst of cultivation. These places – rocks, hills, ponds – are taboo, they must not be fished in, messed with, moved or mowed; they must not, that is to say, be brought into culture. The elves of Icelandic legends and folk belief in the last few centuries are, in other words, a fine specimen of nature spirits and all the standard European fairy legends are attached to them.

It is precisely this last type of legend – about messing with elven dwellings and property – that is in constant circulation in the latter half of the 20th

[6] References to motifs throughout refer to Thompson 1955–58, by motif number and name: Mot. F 230: Appearance of fairies.

[7] Mot. F 232: Body of fairy.

[8] Mot. F 239.4.1: Fairies are the same size as mortals.

[9] Mot. F 236: Dress of fairies.

[10] Mot. F 241: Fairies' animals.

[11] Mot. F 451.3.4.3: Dwarfs do farming.

[12] Mot. F 252: Government of fairies; cf. Mot. F 451.4.5: Government among dwarfs.

century[13]. Practically every summer, and sometimes with greater frequency, a new legend is disseminated through newspapers, television, and radio, as well as word of mouth, about yet another construction project gone awry due to elven interference. Most often, roadwork is under fire, but house building, electrification and factory extension are other prime candidates. I must stress that, contrary to most contemporary legends, the stories are almost always based to a greater or lesser degree on actual occurrences and the experience of real people involved in the events narrated – hence my fieldwork. These narratives make up nearly the entire corpus of contemporary elf legends. They tell of mechanical breakdowns with no apparent cause, freak accidents, and dream warnings, or a series of these, interpreted as the work of elves. The invisible inhabitants of the construction site are supposed to want to deter from, delay or retaliate for the ongoing construction on their property[14].

Reactions vary, but often those in charge of the projects refuse to take any chances, and would rather comply with the perceived wishes of the hidden beings. This may involve giving the elves time to relocate, or abandoning the use of explosives, rerouting the new road, or even giving up the whole idea of building on the designated spot. In other cases no notice is taken of elven interference; that, however, means risking accidents, mechanical failure or even natural calamity. The legends that stick around in tradition relate how the elves wreak revenge on roadworkers, engineers, and even entire communities.

Three representative examples from the vicinity of Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, should suffice to demonstrate traits and trends in these events and the narratives into which they feed. The first one dates from the early 1970s, when contractors persuaded their workers to transport a large rock out of the course of a highway under construction, joining the capital to the west of the country. Rumors reporting the possible elven ownership of the rock had made roadworkers wary and minor mishaps and accidents on site were by some thought to support this word of mouth. The superintendent on site, Pétur Jónsson, and the executive engineer in charge of the project, Guðmundur Einarsson – also president of the Icelandic Society for Psychic Research at the time –, arranged elaborate preparations for the move, in order to assure both the work team and themselves that every possible precaution was taken. The contractor called in a clairvoyant and theosophist, Zophanías Pétursson, to seek the informed consent of the possible inhabitants of the rock. The second-sighted negotiator confirmed that, indeed, there were elves there. After circling the rock for a while and talking to the hidden folk, he claimed to have obtained permission for the work to go ahead[15].

Despite all reasonable provisions, something went very wrong. Perhaps it was because the stone split in two when the bulldozers brought it down again. Be

[13] Mot. F 451.4.4: Home of the dwarfs is endangered or destroyed.
[14] Mot. F 361.12: Fairies take revenge on mortals who destroy their homes.
[15] Mot. F 235.3: Fairies visible to one person alone; cf. Mot. D 1825.3: Magic power to see invisible creatures.

that as it may, that very same night, according to my informants, one of the operators that moved the stone accidentally drove his bulldozer across a water pipe feeding into a nearby fishfarm. The pipe fractured and 70,000 trout hatchlings perished overnight. After that, my sources concur, no one on the project was willing to venture near the rock. Many were quite forthcoming about attributing this disaster to elves, though the fishfarmers sued the contractors. The bulldozer operators had other freakish accidents during the highway construction, which are related as part of this contemporary elf narrative. Moreover, another one of them told me, some twenty years after the fact, that his life had been marred by bad fortune ever since that day. A few years ago, adjacent landowners fenced off the rock and sowed grass around it. At the time of writing, however, plans are underway to move the rock out of its course a second time, to make way for an expansion of the highway.

The second example involves the Elfhill, known by that proper name, that protrudes into Álfhólsvegur (Elfhill Road) in Kópavogur, a suburban town adjacent to the capital. Attempts to shave a little off the hill to facilitate transit have failed miserably, and road construction by the hill was racked with machine malfunctioning and accidents. Contractors and officials, responsible for installing new water pipes alongside the Elfhill in the 70s, also met with adversity. Large vehicles are said to have broken down in the pass by the hill on several occasions and stopped all traffic for hours.

Town authorities allotted properties by Elfhill Road in the late 80s. However, the recipients of the property right by the Elfhill had second thoughts and returned it in exchange for another piece of land. The drawings for their house, however, didn't fit the new property, so they sought indemnities from the town. And, no surprise, the town council agreed to their demands, acknowledging de facto the rationale for the exchange of properties. What's more, the original property was not allotted again. Since the street numbers on either side are 100 and 104, one is left with the distinct impression that the Elfhill has been given a postal address: 102 Elfhill Road.

The third illustration is also from the town of Kópavogur, but dates from 1996. When, in February of that year, a bulldozer operator ran into repeated trouble in Leirdalur, a green valley bordering on another suburban town, Garðabær, it was all over the media. The valley is designated to become a cemetery for the capital area in the year 2001, so trucks brought in loads of soil and bulldozers were used to level it. A hill in the valley seemed to present special problems. When in its vicinity, Hjörtur Hjartarson, the operator, told me the wheels of the bulldozer would just spin, even though the blade was not moving any weight of consequence. Each time he was working around the hill, he added, he had a sensation that he could not quite place, "not any discomfort or anything, but a sort of a fear or something"[16]. This sensation began, he said, "long before

[16] All quotations are from my interviews, unless otherwise indicated. Translations that appear in the body are my own. The original Icelandic will appear in footnotes throughout: "Ekki neinum ónotum eða svona, svona einhverri smá hræðslu svona eitthvað."

they spoke about anything being supposed to be there. Then, of course, I just start hearing these stories"[17]. He learned from the project's supervisor, Jón Ingi Ragnarsson, that there was a local tradition among the neighbors about elves or hidden people living in the hill. After that, the two bulldozers in use both broke down by the hill, each one more than once. On one occasion it took an entire day for a dealer representative to figure out what had gone wrong. Apparently, Hjörtur informed me, the mechanic was astonished by the nature of the failure and considered it something that in theory should not happen. As might be expected, this reinforced the notion that supernaturals were obstructing the work in Leirdalur, and the word spread like wildfire. Soon, the press began paying visits to the site of construction to interview the workers and to film the hill in question. But even the media crews ran into trouble. Reporters covering the story for a TV news magazine on *Stöð Tvö* (Channel Two) described how their camera had repeatedly failed to record anything at all when pointed at the elfhill, but worked fine when used elsewhere.

Eventually, Jón Ingi, the project supervisor, decided to take a break. He explained the situation to inquiring journalists, who quoted his words with some relish: "We're going to see whether we can't reach an understanding with the elves by moving elsewhere for a while. I tend to think there's something there that we can't explain"[18] (*Morgunblaðið*, February 7, 1996). Sure enough, when Hjörtur returned to the hill, after a period of grace, the difficulties had subsided: "Now, I don't feel a thing. I can drive up on top of the hill, for that matter. It's strange."[19] When I inquired about possible explanations for this reversal, Hjörtur said: "Well, in my opinion, well whatever is there, hidden people or elves, it has just accepted this and moved away from there. That's my opinion."[20] Further support for this opinion is derived from visions reported by a second sighted woman to Hjörtur's mother, who is the contractor for the project and Hjörtur's employer. According to two of my informants, Hjörtur and Jón Ingi, this woman saw elves moving out of the hill in the previous fall. In light of ensuing events, she surmised that some might have stayed behind and that they were protecting their home. Consequently, when work could go ahead without trouble, these, too, were taken to have emigrated.

Now, the interesting thing about this elf turbulence in present-day Iceland is that it is always directed against development – housing development, infrastructure, factory construction and other projects contributing to urban expansion[21]. Narratives about the insurrections of elves demonstrate supernatural sanction against development and against urbanization; that is to say, the supernaturals protect and enforce pastoral values and traditional rural culture. The elves fend off, with more or less success, the attacks and advances of modern technology, palpable in the bulldozer.

[17] "Það var löngu áður en þeir töluðu um að það ætti eitthvað að vera þarna. Svo náttúrulega bara fer maður að heyra þessar sögur."

[18] "Við ætlum að vita hvort við getum ekki náð sáttum við álfana með því að færa okkur um set um tíma. Ég hallast helst að því að þarna sé eitthvað sem við getum ekki útskýrt."

[19] "Núna finnur maður ekki fyrir því, sko. Ég get keyrt upp á hólinn, þess vegna. Það er skrýtið með það."

[20] "Ja, ég vill meina það að, ja hvað sem að er þarna, huldufólk eða álfar, það sé bara búið að sætta sig við þetta og flutt þarna í burtu. Ég vill meina það."

Furthermore, and despite the anti-modern, anti-technological streak in the tradition, it is interesting to note that the legends are disseminated to a large degree with the aid of such modern technology as radio and television. Oral tradition, indeed, also plays an important part, but it would be a gross misrepresentation to limit discussion of the legends to their oral narration in face-to-face situations. There is, in this case, no justification for seeing press reports as secondary manifestations of oral legendry. Rather, they are simply versions, and as such quite instrumental in molding the legend tradition in other conduits. The reason I emphasize this point, is that, particularly in a society as small and homogeneous as that of Iceland, the attention paid to elf-tradition by both television channels, all radio stations with news broadcasts, and most of the major newspapers, is clearly indicative of a general concern of the society more or less as a whole[22]. It should be added that press reports are often mildly tongue-in-cheek. In my view, however, this does not detract from the widespread concern they represent, but does go to show the great ambivalence involved.

Certain features of these stories may be reminiscent of some Scandinavian legends attested before the age of industrialization, urbanization and mass communications. Specifically, I have in mind ML 5075: *Removing a Building Situated Over the House of the Fairies*[23] and ML 7060: *Disputed Site for a Church* (Christiansen 1958; cf. Strömbäck 1976)[24]. In so far as these legends resemble the narratives under discussion, they may be thought to present a challenge to the present interpretation. It is true that in neither one is there any opposition inherent between the construction project and farm life as such. On the contrary, the building in ML 5075 is a stable, and that of ML 7060 a church. The way I see it, that argument would miss the point. Surely, legend types do not have an immutable meaning. Rather, their significance is situational and context sensitive. Indeed, the clashes that are narrated in these legends refer to oppositions that were relevant in their social and ideological settings in rural, traditional, pre-industrial

[21] The concept of the urban is of course relative. Iceland, though highly modernized, is very sparsely populated. According to a 1994 census, inhabitants total 266,783, on a surface area of 103,000 km^2. Of these, 244,139 live in urban areas, including 155,860 in the metropolitan area surrounding Reykjavík (Mørch 1996, 28, 50, 52). Thus, what passes for urban in the Icelandic context would not necessarily be recognized as such in more densely populated countries.

[22] Thanks to John Lindow for impressing upon me the importance of this point.

[23] Mot. F 451.4.4.3: Dwarfs request that cow stable be moved.

[24] Mot. F 531.6.6.1: Giants by night move building built by men in day.

societies. Only with reference to that setting can we hope to get at their meaning[25]. We must extend the same courtesy to contemporary folklore.

Roadworkers are the protagonists of the most popular legends, and with good reason, I suggest. Roads are the matrix of modernity. Communications are modernity's first condition and first priority, its conduits and its concretions. Their development heralds a reconfiguration of space – if the 'local' as a category is created through interaction, roads reshape its conditions by transforming and extending interactive space. Road construction, therefore, transgresses the boundaries of the social order that predates it. Roads open up the inside to the outside, bringing others into one's own domain. They blur the borders maintained in traditional metanarratives of community (de Certeau 1984, 126–129).

I submit, then, that it is not at all surprising when such transgressive activity crashes open the gates of an 'Otherworld'; roadwork and supernatural incursions are complimentary expressions of boundary transgression. Even in older tradition, elves were affiliated with socially transgressive activities – e. g. promiscuity, hooliganism, dereliction – and they were most commonly encountered in liminal periods and places – e. g. on New Year's Eve and on crossroads – by people of liminal status – e. g. sexually mature but unmarried young women or unbaptized children (e. g. Alver/Selberg 1987, 36–41; cf. Bourke 1996, 12–14). The same is true, then, when elves nowadays act out against the reconfiguration of social space and wage battle against the destruction of a traditional order.

The most salient difference in recent tradition, is the social or temporal contrast between the state of affairs in the human realm and that of elves. It is this contrast that most emphatically sets elves in opposition with modern technology. This feature is not present in earlier analogues, including ML 5075 and ML 7060. What it entails, I submit, is that, in contemporary tradition, the elves that so vigilantly defend traditional order, are semantically inseparable from that order: they are its incarnations. This requires some amplification: recall how legends from the last few hundred years describe the appearance and activities of these Otherworlders; in all things mundane the Otherworld was a mirror image of human society. In the last century, however, society has undergone a complete metamorphosis, with radical change in economy, demographics, communications, and culture. Households, implements, costume, foodways, entertainment, means of subsistence, living standards, population distribution – everything has been irrevocably altered by modernization. All contemporary accounts of elves, however, agree on this point: there is no sign of change in the Otherworld. Elves still have all the material culture of Iceland's pre-industrial peasant society and none of the outward signs of modernization.

[25] It might, for example, be argued that in a traditional peasant society, familiar with the image of the limited good (Foster 1965 and 1972), at least some versions of ML 5075 could warn farmers against economic expansion. That interpretation, however, would hardly be defensible for the modern context, where the paradigms of consumer society have ousted the notion of limited good for more profitable imagery.

There is a wide consensus among all informants and the tradition is unambiguous: you will never hear of an elf watching TV or commuting to work. Regína Hallgrímsdóttir, an informant who claims second sight and says she played with elves in her childhood, told me that their "costume was old-fashioned, everything homemade it seemed"[26]. Laughingly, she added: "I never saw a hidden woman in jeans! No, just a long skirt."[27] Other informants report that, from what they have heard, elves seem to subsist mainly on sheep and cattle farming. Erla Stefánsdóttir, another seer I consulted in my fieldwork, is renowned for her receptivity to elven and other worlds and widely recognized as the author of several 'hidden worlds maps'. When I asked her what it was like to see hidden people, she told me: "It's perhaps like looking back in time, except that if there are present-day hidden people, such that there is a consciousness, then there's a light around the people. But if I see back in time, I don't see a light. [Question: But in other respects it's comparable?] Yes, it's often like seeing people from perhaps seventeen or eighteen hundred."[28]

So there it is: elves are like Icelanders from two or three centuries back. Ask anyone; the answers will show that elves are conceived of as traditional peasants. Now, if one admits the common assumption that folk narrative mirrors the culture of the group that tells it, one might well argue that the discrepancies evident in this case belong to the class of phenomena that are called 'survivals'. I am of another opinion. The narratives under discussion demonstrate very nicely that, in truth, tradition participants represent culture and history in narrative tradition; the representation is not a true-to-life mirror image and it is not ideologically neutral. The representation of the past in contemporary Icelandic elf legends is fraught with a nostalgia that has both cultural and political implications. In the legends, the community works out pressing concerns of cultural identity, nationalism and social change – they present, in an important sense, a native interpretation of identity and change.

To fully appreciate the nature of these concerns, let me emphasize the scope of the changes that have rocked the foundation of Icelandic national identity. They extend to all aspects of society, but population distribution will suffice as an example: modernization has taken the rural population down from 88.1 % to a mere 9.3 % of the national total in only one hundred years (Jónsson/Magnússon 1997, 90 sq.). Starting at the end of the last century, fishing became an industry in its own right, rather than a secondary occupation for farmers, and fishing villages became permanent settlements and have grown steadily ever

[26] "[…] klæðaburðurinn, hann var sko gamaldags. Allt heimaunnið, virtist vera."
[27] "[…] ég sá aldrei huldukonu í gallabuxum! Nei, bara síðu pilsi."
[28] "Það er svona kannski svipað og að sjá aftur í tímann, nema það að þarna ef það er huldufólk í nútíð, eða þannig að það sé einhver vitund, þá er ljós í kringum fólkið. En ef ég sé aftur í tímann, að þá sé ég ekki ljós. [Spurning: En að öðru leyti er þetta sambærilegt?] Já, þetta er svona eins og að sjá fólk kannski frá sautján eða átjánhundruð."

since. Still today a far greater number abandons the heavily subsidized rural areas every year than moves to them. This trend and the correlate sociocultural changes are much deplored and debated, and these reactions find expression in many facets of culture; folklore is one of them.

In her dissertation on fairylore in Newfoundland, Barbara Rieti has suggested that one function of fairy traditions may be to compare the past with the present, ascribing fairy activity to days gone by and fairy beliefs to former generations. Through this ascription, changes are highlighted and the present is marked off from the past (Rieti 1991, 210 sq.). This formulation finds support in Icelandic folklore, where the beings, and not just the beliefs, are tangible representations of the past. In fact, I believe this valuable insight sheds a flood of light on North European fairy traditions. A great deal of those traditions show distinct signs that they were used to discuss and contemplate the past, in the same sense as it may be said that UFO lore, alien abduction legends and science-fiction are used to comment on and contemplate the future. It seems likely that the fascination with the latter in the United States is an expression of the future orientation in American worldview, as unraveled by Alan Dundes (1969). Conversely, the vitality of elf-tradition in contemporary Iceland may be taken as a sign of an orientation toward the past, amply corroborated by other traits of Icelandic culture.

To my mind, however, that interpretation stops short of bringing out the sum and substance of Icelandic elflore. I propose that the contemporary tradition as a whole may be read as an extended metaphor for social changes. It provides a narrative framework for negotiating their significance, validity, and their import for the cultural system of values and identity. This interpretation is, of course, not exhaustive; I am convinced that elflore, like other folklore, is multivalent. Concerns about nature and technology, for instance, are certainly manifest in the tradition. I would, however, contend that they are expressed within the paradigm of social change, associated with opposite sides of the equation, rural tradition and urban modernity, respectively.

Some narratives, told with varying degrees of belief and various degrees of remove from the original source, are clearly a commentary on change. A good example is the emigration of elves, already encountered in the context of graveyard development in Leirdalur, in that case a third hand account. Another version is the following memorate from a man in his forties. It was transcribed by phone by the head of the Department of Ethnology of the National Museum of Iceland. The man had called in after reading about a questionnaire on elves and hidden people that the Department of Ethnology was distributing:

> "He said that in the early sixties, when he was still a child (8–9 years old), he had seen elves move. He lived in an uncompleted house where Langafit in Garðabær is now [a suburb of the capital]. There was a grassy hill by the house. One day when he was playing with his friend and was on the inland side of the hill, but the friend on the side facing the highway to Hafnarfjörður, he saw a line of short (about the height of a grown man's knee), grayish people (9–10 persons) come out of the hill and head for the edge of the lava. The people carried bags on their backs and shoulders, but Kjartan did not see anything precisely about their costume or the shape of the bags. Kjartan watched this a short while but then looked away to get his friend and show him. Then the elves vanished completely. Kjartan said he had gone up to the edge of the lava and searched carefully because he could not believe he wouldn't find the elves again. Shortly thereafter, the hill was leveled to the ground when properties were developed in this area. Kjartan considered that on this occasion he had seen the elves moving out of the hill, because they had known what's good for them. Kjartan never saw elves another time, neither before nor after this event."[29] (National Museum, Department of Ethnology, file num. 10849)

The significance of this narrative is revealed most clearly when it is compared to a variant from medieval legend tradition, removed from its source by several centuries. The variant is given in *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls* (The Story of Þiðrandi and Þórhallr), a brief story thought to go back to a lost manuscript from the former part of the 13th century (Strömbäck 1970, 168–170). It is recounted in *Kristni þáttr* (The Story of Christianity), which, in turn, forms part of a saga about Ólafr Tryggvason, king of Norway and the mastermind behind Iceland's conversion to Christianity. It is one of four long Kings' Sagas in the large and eclectic manuscript GkS 1005 fol., *Flateyjarbók* (The Book of Flatey), compiled by two Icelandic priests in 1387–90 (Haraldsdóttir 1993, 197 sq.). The story is set toward the end of the 10th century, shortly before the official conversion in the year 1000. The variant is as follows:

> "One time at Þvottá, Þórhallr prophet was there visiting with Hallr. Hallr was lying in the bedcloset and Þórhallr in another bed, and there was a window in the bedcloset. And one morning when they were both awake, Þórhallr smiled. Hallr said, 'Why do you smile now?' Þórhallr answers: 'I smile because many a hill is opening, and every living thing, both small and large, is packing its bags and moving.' And shortly thereafter those events came to pass which will now be related."[30] (Nordal 1944–45, t. 1, 468)

The text of *Flateyjarbók* goes on to relate the coming of Christianity to Iceland. Þórhallr's vision, we are given to understand, forebodes the Christianization, presuma-

[29] "Hann sagði frá því að í byrjun sjöunda áratugarins þegar hann var barn að aldri (8–9 ára) hefði hann séð álfa flytja. Þá bjó hann í ófullgerðu húsi þar sem nú er Langafit í Garðabæ. Þar var grasivaxinn hóll við húsið. Einn daginn þegar hann var að leika sér með vini sínum og var staddur landmegin við hólin en vinurinn þeim megin sem veit að Hafnarfjarðarveginum, þá sá hann róð af lágvöxnu (nálægt hnéhæð á fullorðnum manni), gráleitu fólki (9–10 manns) koma út úr hólnum og stefna í átt að hraunjaðrinum. Fólkið bar pinkla á baki og herðum en ekkert sá Kjartan nákvæmlega um klæðnað eða lögun pinklanna. Kjartan horfði á þetta smástund en leit svo af þeim til að sækja vin sinn og sýna honum. Þá hurfu álfarnir gjörsamlega. Kjartan kvaðst hafa farið upp að hraunjaðrinum og leitað nákvæmlega því hann hefði ekki viljað trúa því að hann fyndi álfana ekki aftur. Skömmu seinna var hóllinn jafnaður við jörðu þegar lóðir voru lagaðar á þessu svæði. Kjartan taldi að hann hefði þarna séð álfana flytja úr hólnum því þeir hefðu vitað hvað til síns friðar heyrði. Aldrei sá Kjartan álfa í annað sinn, hvorki fyrir né eftir þetta atvik."

[30] "Það var einn tíma að Þvottá, þá er Þórhallur spámaður var þar að heimboði með Halli. Hallur lá í hvílugólfi, en Þórhallur í annarri rekkju, en gluggur var á hvílugólfinu. Og einn morgun, er þeir vöktu báðir, þá brosti Þórhallur. Hallur mælti: 'Hví brosir þú nú?' Þórhallur svarar: 'Að því brosi eg, að margur hóll opnast og hvert kvikindi býr sinn bagga bæði smá og stór og gera fardaga.' Og litlu síðar urðu þau tíðindi er nú skal frá segja."

bly because the supernaturals know what's good for them (scholarship on *Páttr þiðranda ok Þórhalls* includes Kaplan 1997; Ström 1952; Strömbäck 1931 and 1970).

When the modern and medieval versions are set alongside each other, we see that the only significant variation occurs in the social changes prompting the emigration of the elves. The comparison reveals that, in legend tradition, urbanization is as anathema to modern day elves as Christianity was to their pagan forebears. Thus, urbanization is clearly the criteria setting the present off from the past in contemporary versions[31].

Kirsten Hastrup, Professor of Anthropology in Copenhagen, demonstrates in her writings on Iceland that the "image of the Icelanders, as produced and reproduced in the strategies of identity creation is the image of the Icelander as a farmer" (Hastrup 1990, 133). Though some of her observations have been contested (Kristmundsdóttir 1996), I believe Hastrup's analysis of cultural investment in farming and the dependence of Icelandic identity on pastoral values is not just brilliant, but also basically correct. Emblems of identity in Iceland – language, culture, history – are all linked with the farmer, while the fisherman, laborer, and white-collar worker are outsiders in the reigning representations of nationality. The farmer is the paradigmatic Icelander; rural origins and experience of farmwork are a popular index of the authenticity of people's 'Icelandicness' (Hastrup 1990, 132 sq.).

Thus, the elves, as a rural traditional population, are eminently Icelandic. They are, I would argue, a representation of Icelandic cultural identity. In fact, there is even an etiologic legend about the national costume, worn on Independence Day and some other festive occasions, deriving it from elves (Björnsson 1963). As superlative Icelanders, elves incarnate heritage and tradition, the fabrics of Icelandic identity[32]. A quotation from an informant illustrates this with greater clarity than I can hope to: "But of course, we're preserving something of a national heritage in this. And because we're so isolated way up north, there are things that survive among us, which have been buried in the concrete and asphalt of the metropolis, in ads for Coca-Cola and McDonald's. Hopefully, we will get to keep this, keep the country clean, not just in terms of garbage but also in terms of thoughts."[33]

The social use of this representation, though not spoken of in those exact terms, is also apparent to at least some folk – which is more than can be said for scholars who have touched on the topic. A letter sent by another informant to the archives of the National Museum is unequivocal evidence. The following comments are a coda to an account of how the informant's brother perished after leveling an elfhill on a bulldozer: "In my opinion, we have good forces, Icelanders, the personifications of nature. Whether we call those forces benevolent beings or something else is of no consequence, so long as we believe in them and they thus unite the country and the people. Whether we work with or against our benevolent beings is our problem."[34] (National Museum, Department of Ethnology, file num. 11434) In the statement that I have emphasized, the informant clearly recognizes how the fabric of identity is woven to support social cohesion. I would only add that cohesion centers on a particular state of affairs, real or desired, and sustains a particular set of interests.

There is still more to be said about the identification of elves with nationality and authenticity. Again, I ask you to recall the otherness of these supernaturals in the old legend tradition, how they mark the strange off from the familiar, wilderness from cultivation, and nature from culture. The meaning attached to elves and all things elven depends on their counterparts in narratives; this other half of the oppositional pair has changed. Elfhills are no longer contrasted with cultivated fields and farmland. Instead, their opposite number is the urban, concrete landscape. Therefore, they are no longer as useful to represent the wild in the cultivated, but rather stand in for the rural in an urbanized society, countrified ideals and traditional values – that is to say, the elves are used to represent authentic Icelanders. Indeed, the shift that has taken place in this tradition has transferred the 'self' represented in narratives from humans to elves. The inversion has transformed modern-day Icelanders, the people planning and participat-

[31] The central motif of these narratives is clearly Mot. F 451.9: Dwarfs emigrate, and it corresponds quite nicely to two versions, Mot. F 451.9.1.4: Dwarfs emigrate because of industrial development and Mot. F 451.9.1.6: Dwarfs emigrate because Christianity offends them. The motifs are attested to in German, as well as Icelandic, tradition.

[32] Theories of fairy origins from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Briggs 1967, 1970 and 1978; Evans-Wentz 1990; Grimm 1976; Hartland 1968; Keightley 1850; Mannhardt 1875–77; MacCulloch 1925; Sayce 1934; Sikes 1880; Silver 1986; Spence 1946; Squire 1905), though irrelevant in this context, strictly speaking, provide a fabulous vocabulary for illustrating my argument. Rephrasing the argument in that terminology, Icelandic elves have mutated from nature spirits into ancestral spirits. From this vantage point, it becomes perfectly clear why elves are thought to rail against urbanization, counteract development and punish the agents of modernization, the bulldozer operators, construction workers and engineers. As spokesmen of the ancestral order and ways of life, it is their responsibility to punish deviance from ancient structures of society and to uphold the codes of morality that protect these structures. While digressing, I might add that a quasi-plausible argument could also be made for seeing elves in contemporary culture as a totem of sorts, and elf beliefs as analogous to totemism – yet another origin proposed for fairy beliefs in the heyday of folklore studies. Seen from that angle, the taboo against messing with elven places, and the concomitant ritual avoidance, is quite comprehensible: of course the totem is taboo! However, the taboo status of these places predates the 'totemic' value given to the elf-tradition in recent years and decades. It is therefore evident, if this line of reasoning is accepted, that the tradition community must have reanalyzed the taboo.

[33] "En svo náttúrulega er þetta líka, sko, við höldum í þarna svolítið þjóðlegan arf. Og af því við erum svona einangruð langt í norðri, þá er ýmislegt sem lifir hjá okkur, sem að er þarna, er búið að grafa í steinsteypu og malbik stórborganna, kóka-kóla og McDonaldsauglýsingum. Vonandi fáum við að halda þessari, halda landinu svolítið hreinu, ekki bara, ekki sko, ekki vegna rusls heldur líka vegna hugsana."

[34] "Mín skoðun er sú að við eigum góð öfl, Íslendingar, persónugervinga náttúrunnar, hvort við köllum þau öfl hollvætti eður eitthvað annað skiptir minnstu máli ef við trúum á þau og þau sameini þá land og lýð. Hvort við störfum með eða móti hollvættum okkar það er okkar mál."

ing in urbanization, into the Other: they are the transgressors, they menace the incarnations of Icelandic identity.

As further confirmation of this transposition, I offer the explicit identification of at least two of my informants with the elves' point of view – referred to in my title. The former is Erla Stefánsdóttir, a seer already cited, who explained to me that it is always possible to reach an agreement with elves, just as one can negotiate with humans. "But of course", she said, "we could get angry if suddenly a bulldozer were to arrive, if we wake up one of these days and a bulldozer has arrived to demolish our house. It's obvious, we would at least want to be told a week in advance."[35] The latter, Jón Ingi Ragnarsson, supervisor of the graveyard development in Leirdalur described above, accounted for the cause of the trouble the contractor was running into in the following fashion: "And of course, you're not OK with it, as an elf in your home, to have bulldozers block up your windows. If we can put it like that."[36] There are no records of such sentiments in the pre-industrial tradition recorded in the 16th through 19th centuries.

Inevitably, then, the construction of alterity in elf legends represents the concerns of the tradition community. As formulated by Roger Abrahams, folklore "gives form to energies set into motion by some shared or social anxiety" (1971, 19). Folklore is a rhetoric for dealing with these anxieties and conflicts by displacing and objectifying them. Once recast in folk narrative, tradition participants can mitigate social anxiety by negotiating a narrative solution to the objectified conflict.

On the psychological level, the legends examined in this paper express not only a mild nostalgia, but also guilt and anxiety about change[37]. Perhaps the best known anthropological debate about rituals and beliefs in the 20th century was that of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown (Homans 1941). The former contended that rituals and beliefs relieved anxiety (Malinowski 1925), whereas the latter countered with the claim that, on the contrary, rituals and beliefs produced anxiety (Radcliffe-Brown 1939). In the case of contemporary elf-traditions in Iceland, it seems that beliefs neither produce nor relieve anxiety, but rather rechannel anxiety about social concerns into another medium. Folklore provides clear-cut directions for dealing with these concerns through ritual avoidance, and it affords a narrative code, through which to discuss and negotiate them.

Through performance, the guilt is partially displaced and resolved in narrative negotiations of identity. On the one hand, I think these narratives argue against the urbanization of Icelandic identity, and so implicitly support rural traditional values and pastoral ideals. On the other hand, cityfolks tell these stories no less,

[35] "En auðvitað getum við orðið reið ef að allt í einu kemur skurðgrafa, ef við vöknum einn daginn og það er komin skurðgrafa til þess að ýta húsinu okkar í burtu. Það segir sig sjálft, við myndum vilja láta að minnsta kosti segja okkur það vikunni áður."

[36] "Og þú ert náttúrulega ekkert sáttur við það sem sko álfur í heimkynnum þínum að láta ýta fyrir gluggana. Ef við getum orðað það þannig."

[37] Thanks to Elliott Oring for pointing this out.

in my experience, than countryfolks and a great number of the legends are local to expanding urban and suburban areas. It seems to me that the narrative resolution bears directly on the values that the legends bring to identity negotiations. After all, construction projects are completed, roads paved and buildings erected. Sometimes this is done despite elves, sometimes with their consent, sometimes in a new location. Construction workers at times comply with elven wishes, at other times disregard them, and are rewarded or punished in different ways and to a greater or lesser degree. The legend tradition, therefore, guilt-ridden though its participants may be, is equivocal in its implications for the future. Some strands of the tradition seem to indicate that peaceful coexistence of rural tradition and urban modernity is possible and mutually acceptable solutions may be found – in a word, that the changes are negotiable. Other legends, however, take a firm, uncompromising stand, implying that if the changes are not abandoned, catastrophe will ensue.

Representing the agents of modernity as Other, it turns out, has political implications. There is more at stake than how the past is constructed in identity formation. Through identity, the past is a resource in shaping the future. Discussing ethnicity and nationalism, Peter Worsley points out that cultural traits are not simply intellectual categories; beyond that, they are "invoked to provide identities which legitimize claims to rights. They are strategies or weapons in competitions over scarce social goods." (Worsley 1984, 249) Tradition advocacy, he goes on to say, is not merely a matter of taste. It "is better viewed as a way of maintaining power, wealth and status in the present, or as a nostalgic spiritual contrast to present disprivilege." (ibid.) Though I have no doubt that contemporary elf-tradition is as multivalent as most folklore, I believe it is a plausible conclusion of the foregoing argument that it provides a forum for negotiating the effects of social change. Farming is a heavily subsidized industry in present-day Iceland, and importation of agricultural products is restricted. Throughout this century, the subsidies have been contested and in the long run consumer advocates have had a substantial impact on trade policies. This, in turn, has contributed to the ongoing flight from the countryside, which has left the landscape strewn with abandoned farmhouses. Perhaps the arguments most often proposed in favor of subsidies have capitalized on the cultural significance of farms and the cardinal position of pastoral values in Icelandic culture and specifically in Icelandic identity. What is to become of this nation, so goes the line of reasoning, if we forget who we are? The elf-tradition provides a partial answer to the question: if the abodes of identity are pulled down and demolished to make place for the otherness of urban landscape, then Icelanders might as well emigrate – if they know what's good for them[38].

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Between Translation and the Canon: The Arabic Folktale as Transcultural Signifier*

The analysis of translation from a cross-cultural perspective is not new in translation studies, particularly in German translation theory. It received its first major exposure in English in Snell-Hornby (1995, 39–63), who proposed the notion of translation as a cross-cultural event, developing ideas first put forth by Vermeer (1986) and others in Germany in the early and mid-eighties: "Vermeer has for many years vehemently opposed the view that translation is simply a matter of language: for him translation is primarily a cross-cultural transfer" (1995, 46). Translation studies in general, and the cultural perspective in particular, have yet to take account of the momentous contribution folklore can make to its field of research. To a certain extent, the reverse is true as well: though the question of folk narrative translation has received some attention among scholars concerned with folklore (see bibliography in Muhawi 1999), the importance of translation to folktale typology and the canon has yet to be addressed. Folktale scholarship has never ceased interrogating the received canon and the notion of canonicity itself (see, e. g., Dundes 1997; Uther 1997) but the issue of translation always manages to get side-stepped, as we can see from the most recent sustained address to the question of the canon, vol. 34, 3, of the *Journal of Folklore Research*. Here we have yet another confirmation (if such were needed) of the translator's invisibility (Venuti 1995).

Arguing from a comparative cultural perspective in earlier research, but placing the emphasis on style, I proposed the notion that folktale translatability between divergent cultures rests on the fact that the genre itself is shared between them (Muhawi 1999). In this research I propose to go beyond the scope of the earlier inquiry by exploring the more inclusive category of the canon from the standpoint of translation, with special reference to the Arabic folk narrative tradition. Such a vantage point allows a novel outlook on the canon as a critical practice from the perspective of comparative cultural analysis. Our initial hypothesis is that translation into English endows the Arabic folktale with a canonical status it does not have in its native tongue. This conclusion may seem obvious at first but that only stems from the fact that translation has been so pervasive in the construction of the folk narrative canon that it has become transparent. As Venuti so forcibly (but not inaccurately) puts it, "Translation lies deeply repressed in

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